

AN ADDRESS

DELIVERED AT DANVERS, JULY 29, 1892

BEFORE THE

NURSE FAMILY ASSOCIATION

BY

JOHN W. NOURSE

SALEM, MASS.:
THE SALEM PRESS,
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BY JOHN W. NOURSE.

In the common ties that bind so many of us together on this occasion you will find the reason why I am willing to undertake what is to me an infrequent task. I am descended from one of the victims of 1692,—from that one who has become in some way the most striking and attractive figure of them all, not on account of any social eminence certainly, nor on account of any superior virtue, it may well be; but because she was an aged woman of upright life throughout her three score years and ten, because of the exceptional degree of interest which was taken in her case by her family and a large circle of friends, then and since, and because she was the only one of the twenty from whom the excommunication pronounced by the church, as well as the sentence of the civil court, has been removed. If additional reason be needed for my interest in this anniversary, and in these dedicatory exercises, it may be found in the fact that I am also of lineal descent from another one of those victims against whose name the merciless judgment still stands, as well as from other ancestry who brought their fatal testimony against one of the accused. If there be anything in these circumstances to tempt one to be clannish, or if in view of the course of events in the past I should be moved to cry out in way of protest,

“How can I less believe in my forefathers

“Than thou in thine?”

I hope that the same circumstances and the same temper of mind will lead me to remember also those other words of Nathan the Wise.

“How can I ask thee to own

“That thy forefathers falsified

In order to yield mine the praise of truth?”

A short summary of what has been said and written concerning the subject of witchcraft will serve as an introduction to what I wish to say more particularly. As to the origin of witchcraft we are told that it is an heritage to us from heathenism—from the debased to the enlight-

ened portions of mankind ; it is a reversion to some rudimentary stage in the process of human evolution. As to the nature of witchcraft, it is akin in its manifestations to certain phenomena of modern spiritualism, especially to those of trance-mediumship and hypnotism : in the semi-humorous and felicitous phrase of the pastor of this church, it was a sort of catching hypnotic hysteria with a mixture of wickedness, totally different from the scriptural idea of witchcraft ; so different that the accusers rather than the accused might serve as illustrations of the scriptural witch and wizard. As to its extent, not confined to Massachusetts or New England. New York cannot reproach Massachusetts with a monopoly of witchcraft, since her clergy in response to the appeal of Cotton Mather answered in substance " You are right. Go on with the trials." Virginia and the Carolinas cannot twit our colony of burning witches, since not a witch was ever burned or sentenced to be burned here, and the only instance of the kind known in the history of the country occurred in South Carolina, and that seventeen years after the delusion had subsided and, we hope, died out forever here in New England.

The actors in the witchcraft tragedy are not without parallels in both fiction and history. In the story of the Pilgrim's Progress, after Envy, Jealousy and Pickthank have given their evidence against Faithful, Lord Hategood addresses him thus : " Thou runagate, heretic, and traitor, hearest thou what these honest gentlemen have witnessed against thee?" And this is no exaggeration or caricature of judicial proceedings, so called, here in Salem twenty-two years after the publication of that familiar allegory. The same constant assumption that the accused were guilty, the same admission of irrelevant and absurd evidence, spectral or other, and the same brow-beating tone are all observable in the conduct of the presiding judge and some of the subordinates. The evidence was extracted by a judge who acted like a prosecutor, and was submitted to a jury that was not wanting in the twelve-fold presence of Mr. Blindman.

The minister of the church at Salem Village, this church, as I hesitate to mention in this presence, was zealous in the witchcraft proceedings. He has had in consequence his due share of odium. I do not propose to add to it here. A vivid, literal-minded man, with a zeal that was not according to knowledge, he became the Boswell of his time. For he has given us not only his own views and intellectual processes, but has

transmitted to us also the material for forming original and perspicuous judgments of our own with almost as much certainty and clearness as if we ourselves had been eye-witnesses of those sad scenes in which he took so prominent a part. Boswell tells us that once he behaved unseemly and was ashamed. The Rev. Mr. Parris never was ashamed of the part which he took in the witchcraft proceedings, but nevertheless under pressure of circumstances he did afterward make an acknowledgment. He did not to be sure bewail the greatness of his error or the suffering and ignominy which he was the means of bringing upon others, but still, borrowing the phrase of Rev. George Burroughs, and reproducing the tone of another of his victims, he acknowledged that it was a very humbling providence that the Lord ordered the late horrid calamity to break out first in his family! If we do not mistake we have found here one of the prototypes of that very humble man, Uriah Heep. We have no sympathy whatever with the assertion that the rigid Calvinism of the time was responsible in the least degree for the witchcraft proceedings. Yet it is evident that it served as a peg on which to hang an excuse for all possible folly. The nearest approach to guilt that can be charged on the doctrine of eternal decrees is that some men are said to have been predestined to be fools, and have made their calling and election so very sure.

The colonial governor at the time has been complimented for the firm stand which he took in arresting the proceedings. Our attention has also been called to the fact that this "rational process" of Gov. Phipps did not take place until Lady Phipps had been cried out upon. We feel compelled to agree with the prevailing opinion that this representative of royalty was a weak man as compared with the responsibilities of the position. He was placed there, as all governors are, to exercise now and then an opinion of his own. Instead of doing thus, he relied almost exclusively upon the advice of a coterie of ministers of which Cotton Mather was one of the leading spirits. And when his attention was called to the manifest perversion of justice in the case of that one name more dear to us, and his own sense of right as well as the advice of his more discerning wife prompted him to suspend judgment in this instance, how like was his course to that of the Roman proconsul who, as he said, found "no fault with this man," and yet delivered him over to the clamoring priests of the ancient, the Jewish Salem!

Reference has already been made to that choice specimen of the

Puritan Pharisee, who was so prominent among the younger clergy of Boston. This man of such large personal powers, who had the gift of tongues—quite a number of them, and who had all knowledge, and understood all mysteries, even the wonders of the invisible world, and who had all faith—especially in himself—and had not charity in equal degree, has become as a sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal, and his vast activity profiteth him nothing. Within certain limitations there is a striking similarity between him and King James I of England. Both of these men had a curious desire to investigate occult phenomena; both had an ambition to gain a reputation for scientific attainment; and it was the particular ambition of Cotton Mather to become a member of the Royal Society, and the successor in that capacity of our first Governor Winthrop. Both of them had a vast regard for whatever was written and transmitted in Latin, and had they lived in the *dark ages* we can easily imagine them disputing in that tongue on opposite sides of some such question as, how many angels can dance upon the point of a needle? or whether in passing from place to place those divine messengers pass through the space that lies between? and acquiring the title, if not of Doctor Angelic, or Doctor Seraphic, or Doctor Mellifluous, some other appellation equally euphonious, and equally pleasing to their vain ears. Great men seldom want apologists for even their most indefensible acts. Biographers often assume this rôle. Froude apologizes for Cæsar and Henry the Eighth. Carlyle sees few spots on the strong men whom he takes for his heroes. Abbott vouches for the lofty motives of Napoleon Bonaparte. Basil Montagu pleads for the innocence of Lord Chancellor Bacon from the crime of taking bribes. The biographer of Warren Hastings agreed with King George III in thinking that eminent oppressor of India to be a much persecuted man. Judas Iscariot has his vindication. And Cotton Mather is no exception to the rule. His latest biographer in a work published near the close of the last year palliates his conduct in the witchcraft matter on the ground of current beliefs. He was, so we are told, the creature of circumstance. He was the product of his environment. He had the extreme misfortune to possess a very active mind, and to be compelled to exercise that very active mind in the provincial town of Boston, far from the center of the world's activity. What must we not forgive to such limitations as that? But if Cotton Mather had been a creature of circumstance he would have followed one current of public opinion as well as another. He would

have followed the ebb of the tide as well as its flow. He would not have been a laggard in getting back to common sense. He would not have spent his time years afterwards in trying to revive an interest in the "late horrid calamity." We are reduced in truth to this alternative,—either of deposing Cotton Mather from the position of leadership which he is acknowledged to have held, or else of compelling him to bear the load of odium which has been attached to his name for two centuries past. The trouble with all these great men in their lapses and errors is selfishness. Had Cotton Mather possessed a wisdom equal to his learning, had he possessed a kindness of heart equal to his subtle and marvellous insight, had he possessed but a half of that noble prudence, which Longfellow ascribes to him in the "New England Tragedies," his own peace of mind would assuredly have been preserved, his own personal ambitions would in all probability have been gratified, and his great name held evermore as illustrious as it is great.

There are more noble spirits and more commendable. Among the score of victims who suffered the extreme penalty of the law, there is hardly one, even of those few who had previously been held somewhat in disrepute, whose answers upon examination, as reported by their accusers, failed to show a clearer sense, and a better spirit than they who brought the railing accusation. Even those who at first in terror confessed, and afterward withdrew their confession, displayed a greater degree of courage than that venerable historic character, Archbishop Cranmer; for he first recanted, and that repeatedly, in hope of saving his life, and only took that recantation back when hope of life had utterly failed him. But these recovered their spirit, and adhered to the truth, despite the doom which it was in their daily power to avert. As for the remainder, they who continued steadfast, and preserved their consistency in both word and act from beginning to end of the tragedy—they who believed that it was "man's perdition to be safe when for the truth they ought to die"—these are they whose names are enrolled most worthily with the company of martyrs, these are they who have been made perfect through suffering. It is a mistake to suppose, if any there be that do suppose, that the story of the witchcraft delusion is a story only of misdirected zeal, of bigotry, superstition and cruelty. It is a mistake to suppose that the closing years of the seventeenth century are not as luminous in our annals as its early decades. It is a mistake to suppose that the light that shines from the examples of these witch-

craft victims is not as far-penetrating as any that ever shone out over the glimmering sea from the cabin or the deck of the Mayflower. By the strenuousness of their virtue they have earned an entrance to the brotherhood of the noblest of all time. The dying acts and words of Rev. George Burroughs, so affecting to those who gathered around not in primal sympathy with either him or his cause; the calm insight of Mary Easty even then teaching judges wisdom, had they but been willing to learn, regardful of others rather than of herself, and breathing the spirit of that prayer "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do;" the gentle ways of Elizabeth How in whom little children delighted to trust, and who forbade them not to come unto her; the will-power—that wonderful will-power of Giles Corey—

"That unconquerable will

Determined never to submit or yield;"

the deep, unletterable, yet all-expressive silence of some of those mute lips, — all these illustrate anew that broad truth of the Master, "And I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto me." To these might Socrates extend the hand that held the cup of hemlock. They are associated with the first martyr, Stephen, with Polycarp, with Latimer, Ridley and Rogers. They have joined the Maid of Orleans and Madame Roland. The dying words of Archbishop Cranmer, with guilty hand in flame, will not be forgotten. The fires of Smithfield still smoulder in the memories of men. And the voice of Rebecca Nurse, saying out of the depths of her relentless fate "I am innocent. God will clear my innocence"—the still, small voice of her with whom the almond-tree long had flourished, and the daughters of music had been brought low—is heard now sounding louder and clearer than the witches' horn, over lands and over seas, reaching to her ancient home in England, and the remotest abodes of the kindred, wherever the inspiration of truth is sought, or the memory of a worthy life is cherished. It comes to us surviving the growth and the departure of six generations, it outlasts the commotions of wars, and the more to be feared obliviousness of peace.

"And that voice still soundeth on

From the centuries that are gone

To the centuries that shall be.

Why was 1692 a crisis in the history of witchcraft? Why did not New England follow in the track of the fatherland, of Britain, and of Spain? In those lands were accusations, and trials, and verdicts of

condemnation. Public opinion sympathized with them, learned judges sanctioned them, and the calendar of saints looked on approving. The victims were sometimes alone, oftener in troops and multitudes. If there were in the minds of men disbelief, or disgust, or open opposition, the evidence of it has been forgotten. There was no visible reaction, and after an interval the superstition stretched out its hand once more to seize new victims and satisfy itself with new carnage. The delusion lived through thoughtless centuries, and was as dreadful in its nature as war, as the workings of the holy inquisition, or the fiddling cruelties of Nero. It was not only an idol of the cave, but also an idol of the tribe.

The answer to this question is creditable to New England. For it is found very largely in the superior average strength and character of the early New England settlers and their immediate descendants. The strength was in first place physical. Only the strong could endure the hardships, the sufferings, and the longing for home that must have accompanied the first few years of life on this soil. The feeble in body, and the infirm of purpose shrank from such a trial. It is to this superior average strength and activity that we must credit the accomplishing of so much at the beginnings of our history, and which awakened afterward the admiration of British statesmen. A people like this, as it seems to me, would be more likely than those whom they left behind to utterly renounce an error of which they had once become convinced, just as the distempers of the strong are more thoroughly cured than the ailments of the weak. A people like this would be more likely than others to avoid what has been called "the unpitied calamity of being repeatedly caught in the same snare."

This strength was prominently intellectual as well as physical. Indeed it is only as the stronger body implies in general the more active mind, that the first consideration is pertinent. Our forefathers were studious men on opportunity, thinking men always, and they proceeded to create opportunities for both study and thought. They founded Harvard College at a time when the first child was born on these shores — Peregrine White, if living — was but a little more than old enough to enter it. They founded preparatory free schools so early that one of them at least — that in my native town — is now close upon its two hundred and fiftieth anniversary. A large part of the men were logicians, theologians, metaphysicians by nature, and fond of showing their skill not only in the resorts of professional men, but also in their

places of daily work afield or in the shop. The same characteristics possessed them then which General Gage afterwards observed, when he reported that most of the men in his province were lawyers or smatterers in law, and that nearly as many copies of Blackstone's Commentaries were sold in America as in England. This county of Essex, in particular, used to have the reputation of publishing more controversial pamphlets than any equal number of people on the face of the earth. Such a people could not always be content with only an hereditary belief. If under stress of new experiences they found their principles insufficiently supported, the result was a falling away from old-time beliefs to a disbelief, passive at first or simply indifferent, but made active by time and circumstance. So when witchcraft trials with all their deplorable results began to multiply in the vicinity, there were some in every town, merchants, clergymen, yeomen, lawyers, who subjected their proceedings to a searching scrutiny. Logical keenness was employed worthy the mind of Jonathan Edwards. And therefore the second line of the inscription on yonder monument "When all around thee owned the hideous lie," must be taken, as no doubt its venerable author intended that it should be taken, with some allowance for poetic exaggeration.

We must give credit in the third place to the religious character of the Puritans. It was observed long ago, that the religion of the northern nations of Europe was founded on the principle of dissent, but that the religion of New England was the dissidence of dissent, the protestantism of the Protestant religion. There were protests here against witchcraft trials just as in other lands and times there had been protests against Papal assumptions, against Tetzels sale of indulgences, and against all corruptions of the true spirit of religion. The spirit that maketh alive protested against the letter that killeth. Great is the mystery of godliness, so we are assured; and the history of the Puritans in all ages shows conclusively their belief that, however impassable the gulf that lies between, the mystery of godliness and the mystery of manliness lie at least in the same direction. How long could such a people be content to see some of its worthiest sacrificed to the insane or malicious? To see common sense sacrificed to folly? To see the spirit of alcohol confounded with the spirit of piety? Or Satan casting out devils through Beelzebub the prince of the devils? Happily not long. And so this people wrought out in all conscience their deliverance from error. On the one side was an ancient belief, taking its rise in heathen super-

stition, confirmed by the Fathers through misinterpretation of scripture, sanctioned by synods and councils, enforced with bulky Latin tomes and *ex parte* reports of judicial proceedings, helped on by kings and queens, magnified with mysteries, intensified with the circumstances of the daily lives of our forefathers, scattered as they were, along the frontier of a forest, dark, foreboding, depressing, as Stanley found the forest of the Congo basin; stimulated with envy, jealousy or dislike, with whims of passion, with religious zeal without knowledge, with accidents and sins, with disordered fancies and disordered stomachs. On the other side were restless minds, disposed to examine anew the foundations of beliefs, to extract the real meaning from Scripture, to admit that there are some questions concerning which the judgment may delay to act in absence of greater light; a spirit too busy to be schoolmen, or "divide a hair 'twixt north and northwest side;" there was a patriotic feeling for peace and the welfare of the country constantly growing; there was the remorse of false witnesses, the reaction from so much excitement, and the purer atmosphere they breathed when the fumes of passion and the dust of conflict had passed away; above all there was the charity that often makes men better than their creeds by preventing them from following a mischievous principle to its logical result.

Therefore, 1692 was a crisis in the history of witchcraft, because 1692 saw the culmination of thoughtful intelligence, and of spiritual discernment, in a degree far greater than had ever appeared in any ancient state. To these sources we trace the stream of beneficent New England influence along whose banks may peace and good will to men flourish in abundance evermore.

It is a pleasure to mention here the names of some, whether or not they are included in the forty of yonder tablet, who thus helped on the enlightenment of New England. *Joseph Putnam*, ancestor of Gen. Israel Putnam, of redoubtable courage and prudence withal, would have dragged out this idol of the cave, like a wolf, by the ears. The Rev. *Francis Dane* represented the theological Andover of 1792, prefiguring the Andover of two centuries later, liberal in purpose, though united in form, to an ironbound creed. The Rev. *John Wise* was a shepherd, and not a wolf, over his flock. No parishioner of his could be subjected to those cruel insults without his loud and earnest protest. Even though that protest were ineffectual, yet he seems to us the greatest man of his

time; for it was the spirit of liberty — civil liberty and religious as well — that animated him in this, as it led him to defy Andros at the risk of imprisonment and deposition from the ministry, and to give to the next generation the watchword of the Revolution. *Robert Calef* of Boston is a name which we ought to keep in grateful remembrance. He was a merchant, and we presume, successful in trade, else he might have followed the example of Mr. Parris, and become to his own discomfiture and the discredit of the clergy, a painful minister in more than its accepted sense. In controversy he was cool-headed and keen; and yet possessed a vast reserve of volcanic indignation, which he did not spare upon the younger Mather. If there is anything amusing in the whole course of these events, it is the disgust of that eminent man that Calf's vile volume, as he punningly called it for lack of a better argument, should somehow be printed promptly, while his own was unaccountably delayed. And if there is anything altogether admirable in the literature of the time, it is the appeal of this same Robert Calef to the noble barons of the age, in which he seems to have caught the full spirit of the revival of English liberty; the courage of Hampden, the chivalry of Sydney, and the poetic fire of Milton. *Robert Pike* was the author of a letter to Judge Corwin, which was doubtless the most acute of all the productions of the time, felicitous in its clearing away of current errors concerning witchcraft on the basis of accepted religious beliefs, and entirely comparable to the analogy of Bishop Butler. We cannot help thinking how much better might have been the result, had such a man as he been at the head of the court, instead of the bigoted and impenetrable Stoughton. These are some of the benefactors of New England. These are some of the men, who with others, of whom the world was not worthy, helped to rescue her from the pestilence that walked in darkness, and the destruction that wasted at noonday. There are some through whose example the learning of the schools was supplemented with wisdom, and wisdom was justified of her children.

The emancipation of New England from this superstition was one of several results of 1692. Immediately they were painful to contemplate. The minds of men withdrawn from their customary avocations and put into a state of anxiety or excitement; families broken, or in some cases reduced to poverty through process of law; churches rent and distracted; a period of material impoverishment equalled only by that which was occasioned by King Philip's war. But there were other results,

broader in scope and more lasting than these. And first nothing contributed so much as this to the decline of clerical influence. In order to fully appreciate this decline let us consider what their previous standing had been. The first ministers of New England were by no means supernumeraries at home. On the contrary they were men of position and influence, of convictions and courage. They preserved their independence at all costs. It costs the Rev. Ezekiel Rogers a parish worthy of his eminent abilities. It cost the Rev. Nathaniel Ward the rectorship of Stondon Massey. It cost the Rev. John Cotton the place of preacher to the university of Cambridge. Others like these came here, braving the danger of a voyage by sea, and the hardships of life in the New World, as they had faced the greater perils of steadfastness at home. Here, unvexed with persecution, and untempted with pomp, they preached with a faith, a freedom, and a power, to which their records lent an impressive sanction. The second generation, sons and successors, were not inferior in learning or ability to the fathers. With few exceptions, they were the most important men of their parishes, and they ruled from their pulpits as from thrones. The Great and General Court sought their advice, or sent them amiable presents. "He could put a king in his pocket," they said of Rev. Thomas Hooker. "Are you the person who serves here?" asked a stranger of Rev. Ezekiel Rogers, and the answer was "Sir, I am the person who rules here." But this power was sadly shaken when the people awaked to the fact that they had been following blind guides, and both had fallen into the ditch. The test of the fathers had been adversity. The test of the sons was prosperity. "And prosperity," as Bacon tells us, "doth best discover vice, but adversity doth best discover virtue." The government of New England had far gone toward a theocracy; but when theocracy began its inevitable decline, it is to the credit of New England that its people cried out, not like the ancient Jews "Give us a king," but with a growing consciousness of their own ability to settle these questions for themselves, they demanded instead only this "Give us our liberties. Give us our best selves."

The course of the judiciary was still more self-injurious. The judiciary of England whose reputation had been inherited by the tribunals of the new world, had taken bribes in high places; it had disgraced itself with cruelties; but, beyond the Shallows of comedy was not wanting in popular respect, nor had it incurred the imputation of prevailing un-

wisdom. To use the common phrase, it had been accused of most things, but not of being a fool. But the stirring scenes, and the intellectual illumination of the time had shown the law resting insecurely on precedent rather than on principle and practically taking for its leading maxim, whatever is, is right. And so the words which Burke applied to the early years of the reign of George the Third fit equally well the temper of mind of New England at this time. "The laws are despoiled of their customary and salutary terrors. Their inaction is a subject of ridicule, and their exertion of abhorrence. Rank and office, and title, and all the solemn plausibilities of the world have lost their reverence and effect."

And third, the emancipation of New England hastened a similar condition in the old country. It required time, for a severe case occurred as far on as 1751, and others, less notable, far later. But the power of the superstition was broken. There were no epidemics of witchcraft. There were no extensive excitements. No large numbers suffered. The bloody scenes of James and Mary and Elizabeth became henceforth impossible. No royal pedant spent his time in composing a treatise upon demonology. No judge stood self-condemned through an inhuman interpretation of a barbaric law. The law itself was finally abrogated; and Britain herself, the larger Britain which we know, found itself benefited by the best thought of outcast colonies just as the home subjects of George the Third afterward found their civil liberties preserved and confirmed through the success of the authors of the American Revolution.

In the levelling and purifying processes of the time we are brought face to face with the fact, that the score of victims of 1692 were the humble instruments of bringing about a better condition of civil and religious liberty over wide portions of the earth. The progress has been slow, but consistently in the right direction. The area benefited has continued to be enlarged, and the scene of immediate conflict to be farther and farther removed.

In proportion to their number their influence has been far greater than that of those who fell in battle. Just fifty years before 1692 the first of the parliamentary conflicts for liberty — the battle of Edgehill — claimed its sacrifice of hundreds of valiant men. Their souls, together with those of others slain on many a field hard-fought for liberty, are marching on. With them we see the ever youthful spirit of these

witchcraft victims, and to whom does it not appear that the figure of the aged woman even is more striking, her eye more piercing, her tone more penetrating in the ears of an attentive generation? With them we see the figure of religion, with robes purified; the figure of law resting more firmly on deeper foundations; the figure of liberty, not the liberty of license, but of a soul dominant over its own powers; the figure of faith confident in its darkest estate that the ways of God to man will be vindicated; the figure of hope, brightening with anticipation of better things to come; and the figure of charity, covering the dull routine, the wayside scenes, the errors and sins of life with the charm of its heartiest glow.

Half way from us these twenty stand to the discovery of America by Columbus; but the fate of Spanish America was a pitiable commentary on the name of the great discoverer, which, being interpreted, means Christ-bearing Dove. The name of Rebecca Nurse is not a misnomer in its relation to the hurt of the human mind, or the healing influence, which it has helped to set in motion. She lived in humility. She died in weakness. She has risen in power. We, her descendants, and all who to her are related in spirit, rejoice, and are thankful for the change that has come. And the closing couplet of her epitaph may be accepted without qualification,

“The world, redeemed from superstitious sway,
Is breathing freer for thy sake to day.”

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